TRanSCriPT of an interview with Tom

ms- tastes basically. If you could be any bird, exxcept an ostrich, what would you be?(laughs)
tw- Gads, what sort of birds am I attracted to? Hmmm. I usually like funny-looking birds, like the Froot Loops birds--
ms- Toucans?
tw- Toucans. Those are particularly nice. I like flamingoes alot. Flamingoes are a wierd bird. I like those birds who can't fly very well so when they land they sort of--
ms- Gooneybirds?
tw- Yes, gooneybirds. They're wonderful birds. There are these wierd cranes that my uncle hunts in Texas, they're really great and its a shame they go out and shoot them, but nonetheless these are wierd, wierd looking cranes. I like vultures, vultures are wierd. They are bizarre animals.
ms- Do they go out shooting vultures?
tw- No, they go out shooting these whooping cranes.
ms- But they don't bother the vultures?
tw- No its the cranes that they're into. They're specialists. The same uncle flies balloons, he's kind of an eccentric of sorts--
ms- Balloons and cranes, kind of an assonance---well, let's move on. What would you say are some of your biggest musical influences?
tw- First of all, I listen to tons of music, piles and piles of different types over the years. Right now reggae is something I'm really passionate about. I listen to two or three reggae records every day. I've done that with other styles of music at other points in time. Now I keep coming back and making reference to certain things. All the psychedelic Beatles songs, "I Am A Walrus", a lot of the post-Beatles Lennon personal songs; Creedence Clearwater, "Cosmos Factory" is one of the most important records, it was my big 10th grade record, I listened to it every day and I'm starting to listen to it everyday again, "Run Through The Jungle" and "Who'll Stop The Rain" are two most important songs to me.
ms- "Who'll Stop The Rain" was one of my favorites.
tw- A lot of what I do is to go into any genre of music and ask what's wierd what's a little bit odd in the style. If I go into jazz I end up liking the Art Ensemble and Sun Ra, some of the classics too,
ms- What do you like in country music?
tw- Rose Maddox is an example, I like all the hillbilly cackles and laughs, and the wierd percussion, her voice I like a lot, it's this Hollywood-rock n roll-country-hillbilly. If you get the records from the 30's and 40's they're pure hillbilly, they're Carter Family type country. Part of what I like about that is that it's a real communal style, it's not so much a rhythm section and a solo and a vocalist, it's got parts that are integrated throughout the songs. I like the asides a lot, where she's singing and the guys are laughing behing her, making comments into the song that interrupt the straight information. I'm also a real sap for sentimental deep-voiced guys, Lefty Frizzell, that really touches my sentimental area--
ms- Charley Pride?
tw- Charley Pride's not a favorite, no, he's not (laughs)
ms- He's got a deep voice.
tw- I know but, closer to that I like Charley Rich. I like women singers in country a lot. There's this wildness, there's this Rose Maddox song, "Wild Men Dig Me", it's a great song, another one is "Skull and Crossbones" 'you should be marked with a skull and crossbones, you're poison to my soul' (laughter) I think that's a great song.
ms- What about foreign musical influences? Why don't you tell us the way you started playing bass?

tw- Well first I went out and bought the thing, it's something I almost bought a number of times and then went out and bought something else instead. The first time I almost bought a bass was when I was fourteen and this friend of mine who was a pretty good musician, he'd been playing since he was eight or nine, he wrote his own songs, he ripped off songs and called them his own and then I would later find the record and listen to it and realize he'd ripped it off, he was somebody who impressed me musically and he was pretty sincere about it, and he was talking about starting a band, and I said OK I've got my money from working in the carnival,I'll go buy a bass! Then he got beat up, he was outside walking and these Italian guys, lowrider types, but they were the Italian greaser version of them, beat the shit out of my friend. I came up the next day and he's drawing this big fist on a huge piece of white posterboard, a monster fist, he's sitting there looking at his hand, drawing it as this monster fist. He became the type of person who doesn't like to go out of his house very often, as a result of this experience. He ended up with a girl I had a big crush on, staying in his house all the time. I introduced her to him. They're still living together. (laughs)

ms- That was many years ago, right?

tw- Yeah, I was 14, I'm 27 now, so that's...

ms- Thirteen years

tw- Yeah. So I'm glad he met her, nonetheless... That was the first time. I watched a lot of people play and most of them had the Western music approach of learning the chords and the intervals, and subscribing to certain rules of harmony and things like that. Now I became political long before I started playing bass, if I had started when I was 14 when I didn't really have any sort of articulation of politics I would have said, This is the right way to do it, this is the way to do it so do it' this way, instead because of politics and worrying about stuff like Sembene's films, Ousane Sembene, this African filmmaker who makes great great films that are never shown in the United States very much except for political culture, minority political culture, they look at 'em and they're sort of intimidated by them, can't watch them with anything but a reverential approach because these are good political films and there's this religion around good politics that exists in leftist culture I'm afraid (laughs). So I don't think his films get appreciated in a way that's more heartfelt, though it's good to do and people do it, but only a small group of people. His films are structurally really different and they way he tells a story is much different than the way Hollywood tells a story. Its a whole different structure. Going into music,with its concepts of structure, I decided, well, one of the things I've got to watch out for is being too rigid and not accepting any structures besides what I was listening to most of the time. So I started listening to a lot of ethnic music. I had always listened and kind of liked it, it was stuff I put on and didn't really concentrate on, but put in the background as a nice ambience, something exotic to hang around in. Now I realized that what I really liked in terms of ethnic music was generally tribal music, music that is nomadic tribal music, it's small groups of people who and... what I like about some records besides the music is there's geese making noises,people walking by carrying stuff, there're all these sounds that have to do with people living, and all these sounds are part of what's going on in the music. So I bought the bass, went out, and stumbled upon an article that had to do with scale study and ethnic scale study, and

it said the bass is a well-tempered European instrument that has a certain number of harmonics and tonal relationships set up. I wanted to learn to play other than Western music, "somewhat" Western music, so I transcribed all these scales onto charts of a bass fretboard. Then I would learn songs by restricting myself to a chart that was supposed to be an Arabic scale. Now of course I realized that it was also a European interpretation of an Arabic scale, but nonetheless it was not the first information a beginning bass player is supposed to deal with. If you learn that stuff it's somewhere way down the line after you learn all this other stuff. That's where I started. I started simply playing within other guidelines. Still kinda simple things, and still tapping into things that I heard, which meant that I tapped into things very Western. I started from this base and I played around with it for a long time before I finally found something inside that framework that I could identify with personally and made sense to play. I also read a lot about ethnic music at the time. An extremely good book is Wellsprings of Music by Curt Sachs. One of the things it said is that people can easily relate to repetition in art, when it has to do with pottery or painting or rugs. Persian rugs. Nobody questions the repetition in Persian rugs and says "That's too difficult!" "That's too out there!" You just put it on the floor and walk around, or they put it on the wall. That's one that kills me, they put the Persian rug on the wall because they don't want to walk around on it because they paid a lot of money for it (laughs). One of the things that is very important in ethnic music is repetion. You don't worry about the fact that you're going to do the same thing over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over. So a lot of my bass playing was that, it was two or three notes, over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over. Part of it is that the part you play in the music is to keep up what's going on so that everything else can happen around you. Other people can weave in and out, and yet what you're doing isn't going to be destroyed, even though everyone doesn't make the changes at the same time you're not going to fall apart. You've got your one part that you do over and over again. It doesn't depend on other people or what they're doing on top of you. Your responsibility is to keep those three, four notes constant, in the same way that a design does that on pottery.

ms- Yeah.

tw- It sets up something that's going to last through the whole structure of the piece. Those are things I learned to do on bass, I think.

ms- Can we?

tw- Yes.

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ms- What would you say is the single most intense 24 hour period you've ever spent?

tw- Memory plays a really wierd role here. You have a way of taking things that were monstrously intense and putting them into their slots. Depending on what mood I'm in or what I'm concerned with different things could take on that amount of intensity. When I'm depressed and I'm with somebody that I'm letting know about things that scare me one of my favorite stories is about when I ran away from home one time. Me and my father had this really huge fight. He came in, he was drunk and I don't remember what I did, but I did something wrong. It was probably a breach of etiquette (laughter). Something, and he came at me physically which he did a lot, he was a military man so I was very afraid of him.. As he came at me I pushed him real hard, and watched him fly across the room and into, symbolically enough, my mother's sewing machine. Right after the divorce she supported herself with that for a while, doing upholstery and sewing things for people. I've always thought that was a sort of odd thing for me to throw my father into.

ms- The Betsy Ross machine! (laughs)

tw- Right, right. It reminds me of this Joan Crawford xxxxx film where she makes her living typing and this character takes the typewriter and throws it, and there's a closeup of her hand and this big huge monster typewriter coming and smashing the hand. In the film it's the type, I think like movies ,it's the type of thing I remember...

ms- Do you think you remember like movies as well?

tw- Yeah, definitely, movies have an influence on memory. Movies are a way of training you to think. If you spend time learning how to think in that mode, you will think in that mode. As with any discipline, film is a way of training you to think about things. I don't have to make films to think that way, and that's something that I really like, it makes me less ambitious as a filmmaker. I feel less of a need to go out and conquer. I don't need to make a Hollywood film because I can think about my own dramas in that fashion. I don't have to propel them into this form for other people to look at.

ms- So what happened in this drama you were about to describe?

tw- When I was so scared? Yeah, OK, I left home and I didn't know where to go. I could not go over to my friends' house because the last time I'd run away from home I went over to my friends' house and my father tracked me down. I didn't have a secret friend where I could go and not be tracked down 'cause my father paid attention to who my friends were, even the ones who he didn't like so that xxxxxxxx he seemed to somehow know most everybody. I was very afraid to go to my friends' 'cause I didn't want to get drugged back that particular night. So I roamed around for a while in downtown Madison. I went to a church - locked doors! I didn't know that. I didn't know church doors were locked. I grew up Catholic. I thought, I'm going to walk in and sleep in the back of the pew, right? So I get to the church and it's got this locked door. Well, another score for the church. I should have known this by now. So I'm walking around and I go into a parking lot bathroom, and I go into the booth by the toilet, and I put down some newspapers, and I'm going to try to crash, try to go to sleep. I start to nod off, and I'm woken up and there's this guy propped up over by the doorway. He was probably about 25...27...my age now. He has this white overcoat on. It's real similar to my overcoat. I had this long black overcoat, a trenchcoat, that's what it is, a little bit more than a raincoat because it has a lining. So he comes in and he has a bottle of wine, and he sits down on the floor and starts talking to me. He's got this long rap about flying saucers, how he's been taken up in a flying saucer, and about how he's been in a mental institution, how he's been through all these drugs - speed, heroin. He just starts talking. One of the things that scared me was that the guy made a lot of sense on a lot of it. He was a very intelligent person. He was paranoid and scared, scared to a point that was more scared than what I was experiencing sitting with him in the bathroom. There was something that really frightened me about that. Here was this person that I could identify with at this particular point in time. He was a lot of years older than me and I just really identified with him, while he's sitting there telling me about flying saucers, drinking and with pockets full of quarters. He wanted to give me xxxxx quarters, you know, here, take all this money. I couldn't take any money from him. I just didn't want to take any money from him.

ms- You didn't intend to leave town, eh?

tw- No, no, no, no, I, no, I didn't want to take any money from him. I eventually just waited till he fell asleep and then I ran out (laughs), out of that bathroom, and waited till that church opened in the morning. After mass I went in back of the pew and crashed for a while. It wasn't comfortable. I couldn't quite sleep in the church so I ended up down on this beahh. I'm sleeping on this beah and my older...I don't need to get into this part of the story. All that's anticlimactic. The really scary moment was earlier

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ms- Sensual things in general.
tw- I'll start with food, food being probably an easier one because I don't eat that many things. One of the things that's constant in my attitude about food, since becoming an adult and deciding what I want to eat, disclaiming things that I had to eat as a kid or even what I liked as a kid, but decided I didn't want to eat when I had to decide, OK, what's going to be my diet now. It's come down to just eating a few things. One of the main things that I like to eat is Mexican food. I always go into the same restaurant and order the same thing. I go into the same restaurant three times a week. Sometimes, four times a week. I try to not go in there twice a day because they always look at me and make fun of me, in a certain fashion.
ms- Burrito?
tw- No , I've done that in the past but a lot of that has been economics. If I WAS GOING TO GO OUT TO eat I would only eat so much, and then I would buy food, eat junk food. There are all sorts of ways of spending the same amount of money, but not sitting down and getting one good meal a day. Now what I do is make sure I get one good meal a day. I go to a restaurant where you sit down and get a good meal. I have fun, I don't have to do the dishes, I just get to sit there and eat my meal and look around.
ms- What restaurant are you going to?
tw- Right now I've been going to this one on 20th at Mission. It's a Salvadoran restaurant. It's a nice family environment. They've got a TV, and watch the ballgames. I wish they would put something else on the TV, but I like the idea of having a TV in a restaurant.
ms- What do you like on TV, what's your favorite TV?
tw- What I would prefer to have would be an entertaining 24-hour anthropological cable show. That would include things like People's Court being moved out of competition in prime time TV, or placed in bad slots, and it would be a feature-
ms- Couldn't videos of actual courtroom procedures work just as well?
tw- It could work, but it probably wouldn't be as entertaining as having the judge and case pre-selected. People's Court is well-produced as a TV show, as a show that would interest somebody who has a different band of interests than me. I could become interested in real courtroom videos, but there's a smaller percentage of people who are going to want to watch, who can wade through the tedium that really exists in say an eviction trial put on TV. Still, that would be my idea. You could learn a lot about things that you might have to go through sometime in your life. You could sit there and watch an example of it on your TV.
ms- You like TV then as a documentary medium?
tw- Yeah, I definitely prefer TV as a documentary medium. Though I find that the other thing that I really like is the phony documentation of people's lives, sitcoms. I really like The Jeffersons, as an example. One of my favorite TV characters is the maid on The Jeffersons. I really identify with that maid, somebody sassing off to their employer-
ms- What's her name?
tw- Florence. This is a character I can identify with, someone who knows that she's more intelligent and more secure than her employers. She can only tolerate the situation by making fun of her employer. This is something I've done in every job I've ever had. I found a way each time of embarassing my employer, letting them know that I'm more intelligent than they are, and yet I don't care that I'm working below them on a certain level.
ms- (laughing) You don't have much problem with that at your present job.
tw- (laughs) No, no problem with that at my present job, but I've never had a problem with that at any job, except for ones where I respected my employer and then it wasn't an issue. Then it's a whole other dynamic. I've had that situation maybe twice, where I've liked and respected my employers. Two I've liked, everybody else have been worms (laughs).
ms- Getting back to taste, is there any kind of food that you really hate?
tw- Gads, I avoid a lot of foods and there are certain ones that make me gag a little bit.

ms- Just name a few that make you gag.
tw- Candied yams are something that I hope I never have to eat. I will do every thing in my power to never put them in my mouth (laughs). It's amazing that those things are associated with holidays (general hysterics). I can't imagine them in holiday fun, personally.(laughs) Lima beans are another one, unless they're really submerged inside a vegetable soup. The idea of a plate of lima beans with butter on it, ugh, terrible!
ms- I hated them as a child, but now I don't even think about them (laughs).
tw- Most food that I don't eat I just find bland and uninteresting. It's not that I dislike it, it's just not very interesting. The exceptions to that are beef and pork, which I don't like because of the way they affect my digestive system.
ms- You don't mind their taste particularly?
tw- No, their taste doesn't really bother me. I don't like the big huge squeeze of blood when you cut into a rare steak. I don't find that particularly pleasurable, but roasted it's okay. Roast beef is something that has a nice taste to it, especially with bay leaves and all that, as long as I don't actually bite into a bay leaf (laughs).
ms- And what do you hate on televison?
tw- A lot of times, movies. Movies are the main things, movies that I'm not very interested in. When I went to film school 40's film noir was considered movies, by the teachers. They had had the experience of sitting in theatres and watching that as movies. To me it was a TV experience. I enjoy it on TV, but to actually sit in a movie theatre and watch one of those things is painful. To watch it in a class and then study it is even more painful. I never had a love relationship with narrative films. Going to watch westerns in a movie theatre is my idea of boredom.
ms- You never impressed me as someone who likes movies. You seem to want to do something with the filmic experience, visual experience, but it doesn't seem like you are into the commercially produced film.
tw- If I were to do Hollywood films, what I really do enjoy about those things was not the experience of going to a movie theater, which I didn't experience till I was an adult. I never really went to movies as a kid. I went to maybe five movies until I went to college. In college I had a big spate of going to see art films, the "European" art films; eventually I tried to see tons of stuff inside movie theatres.
ms- What movies did you see as a kid? Family movies?
tw- Yeah, I lived on a military base. I saw Walt Disney. "How the West Was Won", I saw several times. I saw "Rio Bravo". I saw "Mary Poppins" 8 or 9 times when I was a kid because they'd put it on the airforce base, and it would be there for a long time, and there was one movie theatre on the base.
ms- All your brothers and sisters would want to see it.
tw- That was the latter stage of "Mary Poppins". I had seen it a couple of times and had grown out of it, but I took my younger brothers and sisters to do something they would enjoy, and "Mary Poppins" was one of the alternatives, so take 'em to see that (laughs).
ms- It's obvious what your father enjoyed doing, considering you're one of 12 children.(laughs)
tw- Yes, yes, well I like sex. Sex is one of those wonderful things.
ms- But I'm not talking about sex. I'm talking about fathering children.
tw- I don't think he enjoyed fathering children as much as sex.
ms- It was a byproduct he couldn't deal with?
tw- It was a combination of rabid Catholicism that my mother has, she's a sincere practicing Catholic woman; her whole life she never's really had any doubts about her need for Catholicism. My father didn't need Catholicism. He wasn't a Catholic before marriage. He checked out Buddhism and, uh, Judaism.
ms- Jujitsism?
tw- I didn't know the word for a minute.
ms- Judaism.
tw- Being a Jew. As I was growing up my father used to always say 'I almost became a Jew instead of a Catholic." That was a regular comment he filtered

in. My father would have never committed himself to a religion if it hadn't been for his marriage.
ms- If he'd married a Jewish woman though, you would have been a Jew (laughs) but it wouldn't've been you (laughs).
tw- Right. Exactly (laughs). I grew up religiously confused as a result of this. I was told I was a Catholic and my mother was Catholic, but my father was Protestant. He was raised as a strict Church of England type.
ms- Episcopalian?
tw- No, not Episcopalian, Church of England-
ms- Anglican?
tw- Yeah, Anglican, and of the type where my grandfather probably drinks 3 beers a year, and he sneaks out into the garage to do it. My father had this really intense Protestantism to him that I didn't realize I was growing up with. It was a later discovery. At the same time he hated what he grew up with, so he was always looking for something else. Religion was something that he thought he had to look for. He looked all over the place, but he wasn't very disciplined about it, so he found Catholicism only through marriage. Being a responsible guy was being Catholic, until he got divorced and stopped going to Church (laughter).
ms- Hard to be a good divorced Catholic, eh?
tw- My mother's accomplished that. She's a good divorced Catholic by understanding that she was still married to my father, she just didn't live with him. Now he's dead.
ms- She could remarry now, though?
tw- She could get married now, but I always used to hear her say, 'I either got married or I became a nun'.
ms- Well, maybe she'll become one.
tw- She's already become a nun. I said that since I was fifteen, as soon as we're all gone she's going to go into the convent (laughter).
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ms- What would you say are the books that have influenced your life the most?
tw- Gads. This is hard because I work with books. Books have been really really important.
ms- I'm just talking about something that hits you as being important in the big decisions of your life, something that has really affected who you are as a person.
tw- I don't know if I use books that way (laughs). No, I really don't think I do. I'm just really perspicacious about finding bits and pieces of things.
ms- What books have you read more than once?
tw--Oh! I read a lot of books more than once. I read them more than once,but I don't always go all the way through them; The same with narrative films. I might take sections of a book and pore over them, and then take another section of a book and pore over it.
ms- What some books that you've read all the way through, or virtually, more than once? Books that felt worth rereading.
tw- (laughing) A lot of times, books that I've read all the way through more than once are not books I'm learning anything from (laughs). A lot of times they are books that are real fun to read. An example of that that comes to mind is Ed Sanders' The Family, his little chronicle of the Manson stuff. I think it's a really funny, great little book, real cynical and it has a good understanding of some of the ways that counterculture gets derailed.
ms- Have you read The Party?
tw- No.
ms- It was done as a project by one of Ed Sanders' classes. It's about "Buddhagate", this incident at Naropa Institute.
tw- Ed Sanders has been a hero for me.
ms- I think he's magnificent.
tw- He's one of my big heroes.
ms- He did incredible work on the Solar Lodge of the O.T.O.
tw- Well, the Fugs.
ms- Yes, the Fugs. I think the man is a genius.
tw- The Fugs is like a prefeminist satire. It's this male attitude that is

moving towards feminism, moving towards understanding women as something other than the American stereotype, but it's still crude. It still has that boys' humor, and it hasn't gotten totally respectful yet. It was important to me because I was able to identify some of the disjunctures in terms of how you were supposed to relate to women, how my dad thought I should relate to women..I remember walking with him down the hallway of my Catholic school and there was this girl Tracy who always had abberrantly large breasts from about third grade; I didn't know her in third grade actually, I met her in fourth (laughter). She had large breasts in fourth. She was a school phenomenon. I never really liked her very much, and thought she was a superficial person. Occassionally, about every six months I got a crush on her for about a week (laughs). Nonetheless, she wasn't anybody I could seriously attach myself to emotionally (laughs). Well, I was walking down the hall with my father, and he jabs me in the side and points over at Tracy, and I looked at my dad and said, "What a jerk, what a total jerk. Leave me alone". So in some ways I was looking for Fugs-type information a lot. Another place I found that information, which is not a hip place to find that information, was in Leonard Cohen.

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tw- A thing to end the conversation with? Well, the Invertebrates is my special project. All my personal life stuff is there forever. I'm forever dealing with that, I don't specifically aim at those things as much as just slowly deal with it. The Invertebrates is what I put energy and committment into right now in a focused manner. I've developed a real consciousness about trying to make what I'm doing vaguely populist. That doesn't mean that I try to do something that sounds like what you hear on the radio or anything like that. I think you have to be true to what you're interested in, and you have to be difficult occasionally. Some of what I'm interested in is difficult information. It's not like someone could go meet someone to go to bed with while they're out on the town to this information. Yet that's how music is used, you go and look around for girls in go-go skirts.

ms- You're talking about music that fits into someone's expectation for a certain ambience?

tw- It's music that rhythmically directs at the groin (slap, slap, slap). That's one of the things that it does. Also it sets up personalities that you can sexually identify with. "Guitar heroics" is based on the idea that 'I am a great lover' somewhere, 'I have got so much intensity that-' All these musical styles make reference to people's lives. As a populist there are other parts of people's lives that my art and music have reference to. Some of those have to do with things that I've read in books. Books are something people read. Their ideas can be commerce in the form of a pop song. It can be information condensed down to the 25 or a hundred words that are in a pop song. You can't take a concept that a book encompasses and narrow it down to a song. "Youth For Understanding Japan", that's a history book on Japan. You read a book on Japan because you're interested in knowing what's going on over there, and how that influences the world situation. It also includes the picture of a parent or grandparent asking, "Why are you bothering with that information; you've got other things that you've got to accomplish for me, and Japan isn't one of them".

ms- The song is in some ways more about the generation gap than about Japan.

End.